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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship between readability of advertising copy and conventional measures of ad readership. It was hypothesized that readership scores would be higher for advertisements containing copy with the highest and lowest computed readership grade levels. Fifty-five full-page advertisements that met arbitrary minimal copy length criteria were chosen from a women's and a men's magazine. The copy from each ad was transcribed onto a computer and analyzed using a program for computing Gunning Readability Index scores. Comparable-sized ads were grouped to accommodate analysis of the extremes of low and high that the hypothesis dictated. Results supported the hypothesis and suggested the possibility of "pure cases," since there appeared to be a reader preference for copy written with short words and short sentences characteristic of a "poetic" style and for copy with longer words and sentences characteristic of more "technical" style. When the copy mixed these characteristics, readership appeared to suffer. (A table of results is included.) (NKA)

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SIMPLE WRITING DOESN'T MEAN SIMPLE-MINDED:
The Issue of Readability of Print Advertising Copy

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SIMPLE WRITING DOESN'T MEAN SIMPLE-MINDED:
The Issue of Readability of Print Advertising Copy

In Macklin, Bruvold and Shea's 1985 Journal of Advertising article, the question is raised whether "the readability level of print ads really act alone in making a difference in the effectiveness of advertising." They conclude that "Keep it simple!" is too simple when considering the complex processes involved in influencing consumers' attitudinal judgments. Following Anderson and Jolson's (1980) declaration that this guideline is a "widespread apothegm," they present experimental evidence which appears to debunk this tenet of good copywriting.

Three copy executions for a hypothetical cold remedy were created at readability levels ranging from approximately the sixth to eighth grade reading level to the twelfth to fifteenth level with all other factors except word and sentence length (the basis for computation of readability measures) kept comparable. They found no statistically significant differences in various attitudinal variables toward the brand and the advertisement and concluded that readability of copy, by itself, is not a critical factor in advertising effectiveness.

There are two problems with this study, one methodological and the other theoretical. The former is fairly straightforward and can be dismissed as a chronic flaw in experimental designs--the problem of forced exposure to stimuli. In studies in which the act of reading texts as stimuli is not the focus, but an

intermediate step in the measurement of independent and dependent variables, the unnatural contrivance of forced (not self-motivated) exposure is an undesireable, but acceptable artifact of the research condition. In the study of advertising copy readership, the matter of motivation to read the text is central, and cannot be dismissed lightly.

There are two reasons that compel copywriters to write in styles that are easily read. The first is comprehension and effectiveness in persuasion, as identified by researchers to date in measuring attitude changes that might be expected to be the result of comprehension and persuasion. The second has not been addressed by researchers, yet is central to the imperatives of the copywriter, which is the need to present copy in such a manner that it will present the least resistance to the reader entering, proceeding through, and finishing the complete text. In an experimental situation where expectation of being questioned on the text and the desire to be helpful serve as sufficient motivations to finish reading texts, occurrence of incomplete reading is probably minimal. However, when advertising copy is read in natural circumstances, there may be a substantial difference between the percentages of readers who start reading copy and who finish it.

Two executional factors might account for discontinued copy reading--form and content. United, they suggest the formula that when the gratification derived from reading becomes less

than the effort required to continue, the reader will stop reading. In this light, it is certainly worthwhile attempting to maximize gratification through vivid use of language, salient information, and other techniques that practitioners and researchers find enhance the efficacy of advertising. However, it is equally important to minimize hinderances to easy reading. The reason for the tenet of simplicity is not to discourage use of vivid images or salient information, even of a technical sort when appropriate, but to discourage use of pedantic language, awkward, convoluted sentences and paragraphs, and entangled argumentation--in short, obfuscatory elocutions that inhibit facile construance.

"Keep it simple" can mean "use simple words, sentences and paragraphs" in imitation of the structure of oral language. To prevent choppiness, this style can be modified by alternating short and full length sentences and paragraphs, as Jewler (1985) recommends. When lengthier technical words and weightier tone are appropriate, more academically correct writing may be called for. Both of these styles shares the goals of clear and accessible explicit and implicit content, as well as providing the satisfaction inherent in reading well-crafted writing. That is, writing style complements content in providing incentives to continue reading.

Given the vital role of style in print copy, it is contested here that the effect of readability level on discontinuance of reading

copy has not been adequately tested in the research to date, and thus the maxim to "Keep it simple" has not been tested under sufficient circumstances to warrant dismissing it as a general guideline for good copywriting.

The second challenge to the Macklin, *et al*, study is directed to its theoretical foundations. First, the sum of knowledge concerning advertising executions to date appears to be that no single executional factor can be considered a priori to be critical by itself under all circumstances in affecting the efficacy of an advertisement. Copy tests may show that changing a single word or the size of an element results in a substantial difference in an advertisement's effectiveness, but no one seems able to reliably predict which factors will produce such a difference before the fact in practice or in general in the form of "rules of advertising" (Abruzzini 1967). There are individuals who promote themselves as having such expertise, and some seem to do well enough at it to command substantial rewards. In fact, it is from these experts that the advice to "Keep it simple" derives. However, the scientific community has not been able to satisfy its own criteria for reliability for single factors which can be assured to increase copy effectiveness by themselves.

In this light, an appropriate approach to the study of copy readability should take into account the major determinants of copy style selection. Three likely candidates are product type, message appeal and executional tone. Though each of these resists

unequivocal categorization, for the purposes of argument each can be dichotomized as:

Product Type:	Technical	vs. Non-technical
Message Appeal:	Information	vs. Image
Execution Tone:	Prosaic	vs. Poetic

Though there is certainly the possibility of successful executions where these three mingle, it is also possible to imagine successful "pure cases" where the decision has been made to align these three on one end or the other of these continua. For example, a technical product for which informative copy is selected as most persuasive might be written in the explicit, precise language and structure to which technically-oriented people are accustomed. It can be surmised that the readability grade level of such copy would tend to be high, as Shuptine and McVicker found for optical research equipment, pharmaceutical products, educational opportunities, automobiles and machinery in their study sample. On the other hand, some non-technical product for which detailed information has not been deemed most persuasive might be written in a style more similar to the implicit, evocative style of poetry (Feasley 1985). The readability grade levels for such copy, with lower levels of technical language and freedom from academically correct grammar, could often be found to be low, as was found for liquor, panty hose, how-to literature, slimming garment, food and wine.

In the practical logic of a copywriter, one might expect greatest success in an advertisement where these three factors approach "pure cases," that is, where the tone and appeal are most appropriate to the product type, or to the brand position within a product category. That is, one automobile brand may be positioned as technologically superior, while another is positioned as stylishly designed. Thus, the most successful advertisements would be expected to reside in the high or low ends of the readability grade level spread. Since evidence has already been presented that readability is not likely to be a factor in the persuasiveness of copy, the explanation for the success of these pure cases would have to rest in the appropriate mating of form and content, such that incentives to read copy are high and inhibitors low.

STUDY HYPOTHESIS

Based on this theory of "pure cases," the hypothesis was made that readership scores, such as Starch scores, will be higher for advertisements with copy with the highest and lowest computed readership grade levels, such as the Gunning Fog Index (Gunning 1968) selected by Shuptine and Vicker (1981) as a reliable measure of readability of copy. Since this hypothesised relationship is non-linear, it would not be expected the correlation between readability and reading complexity would be uncovered in single-order measures of association, but rather in second-order curvilinear regression. A test of this hypothesis would have to take place under naturalistic conditions of

unforced exposure. Also, advertisements of sufficient length to yield stablized readability indices would have to be selected.

METHODOLOGY

An attempt was made to test this hypothesis using Starched full page advertisements from a women's and a men's magazine. From a total of 79 candidates, 55 met arbitrarily set minimal copy length criteria of more than one sentence, 100 characters and 15 words. Since the only direct measure of body copy readership recorded in the Starch procedure is "Read Some," differences in completion rate were not ascertainable. This shortcoming, endemic to academic research, of limited access to field research data which meets specific theoretical needs, is the major limitation of the current study. The body copy from each advertisement was transcribed onto a computer and analyzed using a program for computing Gunning Readability Index scores. The Starch scores and Gunning scores for each advertisement where compared using SPSSX ANOVA tests on advertisments grouped by readability grade equivalence level into Low, Medium-Low, Medium-High, and High grade categories. Low was defined as 3 to 6 grade level; Medium-Low as 6 to 8 grade level; Medium-High as 8 to 10 grade level; and High as 10 to 16 grade level. This grouping was performed to produce cells which were reasonably comparable in size, yet would accommodate analysis of the extremes of Low and High which the hypothesis dictates.

RESULTS

Within the confinements of this small sample and inarticulate measurement, the relation of "Read Some" scores with Gunning Fog Index grade levels was found to manifest the predicted curvilinear relationship (correlation coefficient = .33). However, sample sizes at the extremities of the Fog Index grade levels at 3 to 6 years and 10 to 16 years are too small to place great reliance on this finding, even though analysis of variance shows this effect, controlled for copy length, to be significant at the .03 level (Figure 1).

Figure 1
DIFFERENCES IN MEAN "READ SOME" SCORES BY
GROUPED GUNNING FOG INDEX GRADE LEVEL SCORES
(p = .03)

	Grade Level			
	3.0--6.0	6.1--8.0	8.1--10.0	10.0--16.0
N =	8	22	19	13
Read Most	19.00	13.36	11.21	16.77

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the small cell sizes and lack of congruence of the dependent "Read Some" score with the theoretical needs of this investigation, the direction indicated by the statistics presented here suggests the value of pursuing this investigation of copy readability as a significant contributor to the success of print advertising. Further, it supports the study hypothesis that Low and High grade level copy will score better on readership measures than Medium grade level copy. This also suggests the possibility of "pure cases," since there appears to be a reader preference for copy written with short words and short sentences, suggesting the "poetic" style, and for copy with longer words and sentences characteristic of a more "technical" style. When the copy style mingles these characteristics, readership seems to suffer.

SUMMARY

This paper argues that studies to date have not invalidated the

simplicity criteria for good copywriting, but have only misinterpreted it. Simple writing does not mean simple-minded writing. "Vaguely written ads that provide easy-to-read, but pallid information" (Holbrook 1978) are not the logical opposite of technically informative copy. Artfully prepared copy can be successful in contexts where vivid imagery can be evoked that does not address technical details of the product. Likewise, technically informative copy need not be hard-to-read even though presented using more sophisticated words and structure, if well crafted to make its content readily accessible and if this style of execution is appropriate to strategic goals and reader expectations for the advertisement. In both cases, and in mixtures to all degrees, conventional wisdom encouraging clear, articulate executions should be heeded. Most importantly, in the common circumstance of writing to non-technically based appeals and in low reader involvement situations where the motivations to continue reading may be low, "simple" is still probably best.

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